

## **Recalling Sunil: A Socialist Intellectual among the Oppressed**

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“The three months that we spent together in the prison last year brought us closer even further. . . . Throughout our prison term, we ate together in the same pots. In the name of pots, all what we had been given was one *thali* each. We would, therefore, jointly take *daal* in one *thali* for both of us and similarly vegetables in another and thus eat together. The beard, spectacles, overall attire, similar looking chappals made out of tyre, the lean frame and other such features had given us quite similar looks. People would often confuse me with Rajnarayan and Rajnarayan with Sunil.” (Sunil in ‘*Ladat Ja Re*’, 1991; Translated from Hindi). This statement was recorded almost 24 years ago by Sunil after his then 30-year old comrade-in-arms Rajnarayan of Kisan Adivasi Sangathan met his most untimely death due to a road accident in April 1990. Kisan Adivasi Sangathan (KAS), jointly organized by Rajnarayan and Sunil in mid-1980 in Kesla Block, Distt. Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh, was allied with Samata Sangathan led by Kishen Patnaik, the formidable socialist thinker.

No less untimely and tragic was the demise of Sunil (Birth: 4<sup>th</sup> November 1959) himself on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2014 in the neuro-sciences ICU of AIIMS, New Delhi following massive brain hemorrhage five days earlier at his home at Village Bhumkapura, near Kesla. On 16<sup>th</sup> April afternoon, Sunil was brought to Bhopal by his wife Smita and local Samajwadi Jan Parishad and KAS activists from Kesla and Itarsi after a two-hour road journey in a state of unconsciousness and admitted in a private hospital where he underwent brain surgery. Two days later, he was airlifted to AIIMS. He remained unconscious with full life-support system until his demise, while his hundreds of friends, co-workers and admirers kept their fingers crossed from all over the country – from places as far away as Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Delhi, Guntur, Kannur, Jalpaiguri, Kolhapur, Ranchi, Sambalpur and Shillong, apart from the villages of Betul, Harda, Hoshangabad, Khandwa, Rewa and other Districts of Madhya Pradesh.

The much-expected ‘miracle’ did not happen and the country lost a truly committed and visionary ‘socialist intellectual working among the oppressed’. As a footnote, it must be recorded here that Sunil had no place for ‘miracles’ of any kind in his *karma*-filled life. His strategy and vision of social transformation was rooted firmly in a scientific understanding of the objective political, socio-economic and cultural conditions prevailing in the society.

### **Socialisation of an Intellectual-cum-Activist**

Let us return to early 1980s and the formative years of Sunil’s relationship with Rajnarayan. Sunil completed his education until B.A. in government schools and college of Rampura, a small remote *kasba* of District Mandsaur, M.P, on the border of Rajasthan. His father, Dr. Ram Prasad Gupta taught economics in the Rampura college. Undoubtedly, Sunil’s later abiding interest in

economics for the wider social good must have been influenced by his father who himself continues to date to be a widely acknowledged writer on the economic and developmental issues impacting the masses, his advanced age notwithstanding. Interestingly, some contend that Sunil had no less reverse influence on his father's thinking.

In late 1970s, Sunil joined M.A. programme in economics at Jawaharlal University (JNU), New Delhi. During this period, Sunil won the respect from his fellow-students and faculty alike for his profound analytical understanding of the subject and its relationship with socio-political issues. In early 1980s, like Rajnarayan, Sunil, too, joined Samata Yuvjan Sabha, the student-cum-youth wing of Samata Sangathan and started visiting Kesla from time to time. He showed his early leadership qualities by leading a Cycle Yatra from Delhi to Guwahati in 1982-83 in support of the Assam student movement and a Delhi-Amritsar Yatra in 1984 against the anti-Sikh wave of violence in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination.

### **Shifting Social Base: From Delhi to Kesla**

In April 1985, while pursuing his Ph.D. work at JNU under the guidance of the indomitable economist Late Prof. Krishna Bhardwaj, Sunil received the news of the Rajnarayan-led movement of tribals in Kesla on the issue of scarcity of water during which the people broke *matkas* (earthen pots) as a mark of protest. This was the signal Sunil needed to take the decisive turn in his life. On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1985, he quit his JNU research work and shifted his social base to Kesla for the rest of his life. The Kesla region suffered from a severe draught in 1986, leading to a major loss of the kharif crop. Repeated appeals to the government for relief brought no response. In November 1986, KAS organized a historic six-day foot march (*pad yatra*) from Bhauran Village of the neighbouring Betul District to Bhopal under the joint leadership of Rajnarayan and Sunil. The central theme of the foot march was 'freedom from drought and poverty'. When the Chief Minister refused to meet the *pad yatris*, a *chkka jam* (causing traffic jam) followed by forced entry into his official residence was used to compel him to discuss the demands. Although the Chief Minister yielded to six demands promising small-scale irrigation schemes, undertaking relief works, lifting ban on fuel wood collection from the forest and non-collection of dues and loans for the time being. Yet, the state government continued to dilly-dally on its promises. The agitation, too, continued, addressing new forms of oppression relating to forest, water, electricity and local corruption. Exactly a year after the meeting in Bhopal with the Chief Minister, KAS gave a call for observing a 'Farce Day' (Dhokha Diwas) on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1987 at Kesla but to no avail.

By this time, the local situation had become desperate due to three independent successive government schemes, each having caused major displacement in the Kesla Block in 1970s. First, the Tawa Dam had submerged 44 villages and 21,000 hectares of thick forest. Second, the army proof range for testing weaponry and ammunition displaced 25 villages. Third, the Ordinance Factory near Itarsi occupied 9 more villages and the surrounding forest. The whole region suffered from extreme deprivation and impoverishment. The primary cause was displacement followed by non-settlement of the democratic rights of the tribals with respect to their *jal-jangal-zameen* (water, forest and land) and *jeevika* (livelihood). After the death of Rajnarayan in 1990 due to road accident, the responsibility of engaging with this dire situation fell upon Sunil's shoulders.

## **Struggle and Reconstruction (*'Sangharsh aur Nirman'*)**

Shaheed Shankar Guha Niyogi, the radical leader of the mine workers' trade union movement in Chhattisgarh during the period from 1977 to 1991 had established the concept of '*Sangharsh aur Nirman*' (Struggle and Reconstruction) as a new political philosophy in India. The visionary creation of a workers' hospital, elementary schools and semi-mechanised technology of iron ore extraction as organic part of the trade union struggle inspired people's movements nation-wide and defined an alternative model of development controlled by the workers, rather than the ruling capitalist class. Taking cue from this experience, Sunil in early 1990s organized Kesla's displaced tribals to fight for retrieving their eroded rights to *jal-jangal-zameen* and *jeevika*. Following a sustained struggle, the then Congress government of Madhya Pradesh was finally persuaded to concede a five-year rehabilitation package on 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1996 with regard to the Tawa Reservoir. The package included, among other things, right to draw-down cultivation (i.e. cultivating the reservoir banks when the water recedes) and right to fishing on a cooperative basis for the displaced persons. For this purpose, KAS constituted Tawa Matsya Sangh (TMS) – a duly registered federation of 37 primary co-operative societies of displaced tribals residing in the villages surrounding the reservoir. Fish was sold locally as well as packed and transported to markets as far away as Howrah. TMS not only protected the reservoir from illegal fishing and poaching, but even undertook rearing of fish-seed fingerlings to replenish stocks in the reservoir. During the next five years, the management by displaced tribals led to a significant increase in fish production and fisherpersons' income, even as various imaginative and scientific ways and means were adopted to ensure conservation of fish resources and the reservoir itself. It created an alternative model of ecologically sustainable fisheries in big reservoirs with community participation and control. The alternative model attracted nation-wide attention.

Yet, the KAS had to launch a struggle again when the five-year contract came up for renewal in December 2001. The public pressure, including testimonies from economists and environmentalists, forced the government to renew the contract in early January 2002. However, by the time this contract came up for renewal in 2006, the Congress government stood replaced by BJP. The democratic space for negotiations was further shrunk. The state government, using the false pretext of inclusion of Tawa Reservoir in the proposed Satpura Tiger Reserve, refused to renew the contract for the second time. The official stand, towing the conventional 'conservationist' line, held that that the very presence of human beings in the Tiger Reserve would endanger wildlife. KAS had no option but to launch an intense agitation once again to protect the hard-won democratic rights of the tribals. Showing unusual imagination, Sunil took recourse to yet another strategy of recovering the democratic space. He approached some of us in Bhopal to organise a public study of the TMS experiment. In November 2006, we constituted a high profile six-member committee, called 'Tawa Bio-Diversity and Human Relationship Expert Committee', under the chairpersonship of the reputed environmental scientist Prof. Madhav Gaqdgil of Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. Other members of the expert committee included well-known scientists and experts in aquaculture and fisheries from Barkatullah University, Bhopal and other government institutions.

## **Conflict between Conservation and People: A Presumption of Capitalist Development Model**

While confirming the afore-mentioned TMS claims of increased fish production and income levels of the tribals along with improved conservation of the fish stocks, the Madhav Gadgil Expert Committee Report, submitted to the state government in April 2007 observed, “Thus, it is clear that reservoir fisheries is a crucial resource for the people displaced from the dam, especially if harvested under a democratic, participative and transparent framework, which TMS has been able to provide.”

More importantly, citing from various national and international studies of the experience of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, the Expert Committee questioned the official conventional stand, based on untested presumptions, as follows, “The new paradigm of conservation views local communities as partners or as conservers in their own right, rather than as ‘enemies’ or ‘problems’. Without diminishing focus on conservation, including strict protection where needed, it also gives attention to the livelihood security, cultural sustenance, and other needs of the local people. Finally, it also makes explicit links between conservation and elimination of poverty as well as achievement of sustainable development across the land (and sea) scape.”

Finally, the Expert Committee concluded that “there seems to be no scientific evidence whatsoever regarding the [adverse] impact of fishing and draw-down cultivation on the tiger or other threatened species in the Satpura Tiger Reserve” and recommended “extension of the fishing lease of the Tawa Matsya Sangh in the Tawa Reservoir on a long-term sustainable basis” under certain additional provisions for undertaking of systematic dialogue with the tribals and long-term scientific impact assessment studies of impact on wildlife jointly by the government and TMS. The Expert Committee further advised the state government that, “Only such a rational, ecologically viable and systematic approach would resolve the current conflicts around the Tawa Reservoir and Satpura Tiger Reserve and ensure both conservation of wildlife and the security of livelihoods of the villagers, apart from being in consonance with the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy as enshrined in the Constitution.”

As could be anticipated, the Madhav Gadgil Expert Committee Report did not fit within the capitalist model of development pursued by the state government. Since the initial contract between TMS and the M.P. Matsya Mahasangha in 1996, the neo-liberal policies of post-globalisation India were pushing the various governments to exclude people from its development paradigm. The false presumptions of the capitalist model juxtaposing ‘conservation against the people and their democratic rights of livelihood’ dominated the official discourse. The state government did not only refuse to take cognizance of the Expert Committee Report but also denied any space for negotiations with KAS or TMS. Thus the displaced tribals of Kesla Block stood displaced once again and, this time, for ever!

## **Alternative Politics for Political Alternative – A Plea for Socialist Model of Development**

Following the TMS experience, Sunil engaged himself with building a movement for ‘alternative politics for a political alternative’ across the country. At a seminar in held in Indore in February

2008, he observed, “No movement can make much headway as long as there is a lack of readiness to undertake analysis all the way from the modern development policy, modern governance to capitalism and build alternative of each of them along with ideological preparedness. . . . The most crucial issue in this context is whether you have a sense of urgency to transform this world or not. Inter-linked with the same is the question whether you can see any alternative or not. Or whether you have concluded that there is no alternative to capitalism and globalization. . . . If this is your well-considered view, you can then neither build alternative politics nor a political alternative. [Ref. 3, p. 5]”

Sunil takes an unambiguous stand, “This ideological vacuum is indeed very dangerous. There are many who pooh-pooh the very mention of ideology. . . . this mindset renders us directionless. . . . But we can’t escape the criticality of building a framework for first comprehending and then transforming the world around us. This framework may be viewed as an ideology. It may be a socialist ideology or Sarvodaya ideology or a Marxist one or, for that matter, any other ideology. What is dangerous is the vacuum of ideology since it ultimately ends up reinforcing the *status quo*. [ibid, p. 5]” He further elaborates, “The most fundamental question is whether it is possible to transform the world and build instead a new egalitarian and just society. If you grant this possibility, an alternative politics shall emerge. However if you are not even willing to grant such a possibility, there shall not be any alternative politics. . . . the so-called alternative shall then remain confined within only the prevailing political domain – BJP shall continue to replace Congress or Congress shall continue to replace BJP or if a third party does emerge, this, too, shall only be a new version of the same. [ibid, p. 5]”

Sunil concluded at the Indore seminar (2008) with a futuristic vision, “The dream of socialism has still not collapsed nor will it ever. . . . There is no alternative to socialism if one is interested in resolving the present global crisis and saving the world. People have the common sense to know that this capitalism and modern industrial development is taking the world to its destruction. . . . The alternative may be unconventional. . . . It is not necessary that we may have to wipe out the idea of private property altogether nor will it be necessary to build a huge state-centred dictatorship. Such experiments have collapsed in China and Soviet Union but the failure of old experiments do become the source of new lessons. Let us, therefore, conceive a new form of socialism, wherein, while seeking an alternative to the capitalist system, we shall concomitantly conceive a new model of development as well as a new civilization. . . . This issue of alternative politics is not just of a political alternative but it is inextricably linked to the conception of socialism and its ideology. [ibid, p. 5-6]”

### **Questioning ‘Political Alternatives’ lacking Ideology**

Four years later, Sunil dared to tread on a path where the vast majority of university-based academics would dither. In September 2012, Sunil’s conception of ‘alternative politics for political alternative’ had matured enough for him to make sense out of the confusing signals coming out of the anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal and their rushed pursuit of a political alternative. Sunil cautions, “It is relatively easy to build yet another version of contemporary politics. However, there are four essential elements of alternative politics aimed at radical systemic transformation : **first**, ideological understanding, holistic perspective and a vision of new India; **second**, reliable organizational base amongst the masses

at the grassroots level; **third**, wide-ranging experience and capacity to undertake both ‘Struggle and Reconstruction’ (*Sangharsh aur Nirman*), just to use Shankar Guha Niyogi’s idiomatic expression; and **fourth**, patience and commitment for a protracted struggle. [Ref. 4, p. 14]” Without mincing words, Sunil hammers his critique of the anti-corruption movement, “The roots of the demonic problem of corruption in India are hidden deep in the capitalist system’s extreme inequality, cut throat competition, greed, consumerist culture, policies of globalization-liberalisation, expanding corporate regime and centralized governance. In this sense, corruption is but a superficial symptom of a deeply embedded malaise. . . . Hence, they [i.e. leaders of the anti-corruption movement] will end up treating the symptoms while the malaise will continue as ever. [*ibid*, p. 15]”

On 29<sup>th</sup> July 2012, while releasing Kejriwal’s book entitled ‘Swaraj’ at Delhi’s Jantar Mantar, Anna Hazare heralded it as ‘the effective model for bringing the real *swaraj* in the country’. This, however, did not prevent Sunil from raising issues, “But Kejriwal’s Swaraj stops here [i.e. at decentralization to *Gram Sabhas* and *Mohalla Sabhas*] and does not go beyond this. He overlooks the fact that administrative decentralization shall not succeed as long as it is not accompanied by economic decentralization; economic and social inequality is not diminished; and the country’s economic system and development model is not transformed. All such elements were inherent in Gandhi’s *swaraj*. . . . Everything will be set right by devolving power to the local people – hunger and unemployment shall be eliminated; education and health services shall improve; naxalism shall end; prohibition shall succeed – this book makes several such claims. This is not only over-simplification but also one-sided and misleading. [*ibid*, p. 15]”

Sunil goes on to ask whether the neo-liberal capitalism’s assault on India deserves consideration or not in building the much-hyped political alternative, “During the past few decades, the world has entered a new phase of capitalism-imperialism along with financial globalization which itself is undergoing a crisis. . . . The dominance of domestic and foreign corporate bodies has been established on India’s economy, politics, society and culture. Education and health have undergone unbridled privatization, commercialization and distortion. Modern development has led to a series of economic, social and environmental crises. . . . It won’t suffice anymore to claim that inflation, poverty and all other problems are but a consequence of corruption. We will have to make up our mind regarding the economic policies. You can’t even conceive of a political alternative without taking a clear stand on the question of livelihood of peasantry, workers, fisherpersons, *dalits*, tribals, women and youth and without engaging with their respective struggles. [*ibid*, p. 15-16]” Sunil concludes by issuing a polite but stern reminder from history, “No revolution can take place without ideology. No major transformative movement would move forward without an ideological understanding. This principle holds true for all – from Gandhi, Jaiprakash, Lohia and Ambedkar to Lenin, Mao, Nelson Mandela, Che Guvera and Chavez. [*ibid*, p. 17]”

### **Garmsci’s Organic Intellectual Among the Oppressed**

Undoubtedly, Sunil, to use Mao’s words, went to the oppressed people, worked with them, learnt from them and returned what he learnt back to them. However, he did not spend his life merely romanticizing this experience which he could very well have done – just like the majority of NGOs tend to do by forming *math* like life-long institutions. He was primarily a political person,

uncompromisingly dedicated to socialism. When the experience of building an alternative model of development through Tawa Matsya Sangh would not be allowed to move forward due to the politics of capitalist model of development, Sunil realized the limits of this process. From then onwards, he focused on theorizing his experience and knowledge and built upon his ideological training in Lohia's socialism as elaborated and enriched by Kishen Patnaik.

Sunil would also be remembered for his numerous essays and booklets, mostly in Hindi. He wrote on an amazing range of contemporary issues of socio-political or developmental concern, even while most of us would be engaged in decoding the issue itself. His writings revealed an unusual grasp of data, facts and narratives and his insistence on using simple language and expressions to articulate the most complex ideas was exemplary. Two recent examples will testify to this distinction. In September 2013, he delivered a one-hour lecture in Hindi at Bargarh, Odisha which presented a profound analysis of India's economic policy, explaining the neo-liberal trap India is in and what kind of alternative action is required to liberate ourselves from it (available on YouTube: <http://youtu.be/-sagcT1rveE>). On 7<sup>th</sup> April this year, Sunil, along with various political party representatives, participated in a dialogue on education policy organized by Shiksha Adhikar Manch, Bhopal. Representing Samajwadi Jan Parishad, his articulation was the ideologically sound and made immense sense (available on YouTube: <http://youtu.be/MfD - 2Jlgyg>). Incidentally, he was also a founder-member of the All India Forum for Right to Education and guided the movement closely as its Member, Presidium.

Sunil's writings and speeches on 'alternative politics for political alternative' are indeed path-breaking and provide us with a tool to assess the contemporary politics. Sunil's analysis of the anti-corruption movement's move in recent years to build a political alternative without defining its ideology is insightful. This also explains why, unlike many of his dear and senior colleagues in the socialist movement, he chose to remain in Samajwadi Jan Parishad, even though this choice significantly limited his political options. He would rather pursue a lonely path, rather than do what he is not ideologically comfortable with.

Finally, even at the risk of inviting a debate, I would dare to pay my tribute to Sunil as an organic intellectual among the oppressed in the Gramscian sense. He was one of the leaders in the country in building a sustained counter-hegemonic discourse on neo-liberal capitalism and its assaults on India and her people by advocating a socialist model of development as an alternative.

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